A Conversation with Huang Weiwen: Reflections on Asian Paleolithic Research

SARI MILLER-ANTONIO AND LYNNE A. SCHEPARTZ

HUANG WEIWEN IS PROFESSOR OF PALEOLITHIC ARCHAEOLOGY at the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP), Academia Sinica, Beijing. He was born in 1937 in Guangdong Province, China. As an early student of the preeminent archaeologist Jia Lanpo, Huang was one of the first to be trained specifically in Paleolithic archaeology in the PRC. The discoverer of Lantian Man (*Homo erectus*) from Gongwangling, Lantian County, Shaanxi Province, he is one of the foremost Paleolithic archaeologists in China. He directed the fieldwork station at Zhoukoudian from 1974 to 1979. From 1992 to1996, he was the director of the Laboratory for Paleolithic Archaeology at the IVPP. He has worked in all regions of China and has traveled extensively to research comparative collections and visit archaeological sites in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the U.S. Among Huang's notable publications are *The Story of Peking Man* (1990) (co-authored with Jia Lanpo), *Bifaces in China* (1987), *Middle Pleistocene Acheulean-like Stone Technology of Bose Basin, South China* (2000), *Archaeological Evidence for the First Human Colonisation of East Asia* (1997), and *Excavations at Panxian Dadong, Guizhou Province, Southern China* (1995). He is currently the senior Chinese director of both the Panxian Dadong and Bose Basin collaborative projects. This interview took place in Beijing in June 2002.

How did you first become interested in archaeology?

I grew up near Guangzhou City in the south. I was preparing to take my exams to finish middle school in 1954. It was usual for teachers to give students suggestions about what to study—I was interested in geography, but the headmaster said, "We suggest archaeology."

Did he give this suggestion to other students?

S. Miller-Antonio is with the Department of Anthropology/Geography at California State University, Stanislaus; L. A. Schepartz is with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio.

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Fig. 1. Huang Weiwen and Sari Miller-Antonio.

No, only me. He said, "We suggest you study archaeology because your thinking is creative." But I think he suggested that because my work in chemistry and physics was not as good.

So where were you sent to study?

At that time in China, only one university had archaeology—Peking University. However, they only selected students from North China in 1954, so I went to Zhongshan University near my hometown in Guangdong Province to study history. There was no paleolithic archaeology program of study at Zhongshan, only Neolithic and Dynastic. Pei Wenzhong, discoverer of the first skull of Peking Man, and Jia Lanpo, co-researcher of the Zhoukoudian Project since 1931, invited me to the IVPP in Beijing for training, with the plan that I could return to Zhongshan University and start a program of Paleolithic archaeology there.

I went up to Beijing in 1960. I was only supposed to stay two years, but at that time, social and economic conditions in China were very difficult. Zhongshan University had to stop some proposed programs including Paleolithic archaeology. Pei and Jia allowed me to stay for four years during these very hard times. I spent most of my time [three years] studying geology and geography! I liked geology and geography because they involved fieldwork and the ability to travel widely and work in many regions. This was what I wanted for my career—not to confine my research to one place—and Paleolithic archaeology was the one area of archaeology that allowed you to do this kind of travel.

How did you meet Jia Lanpo?

In December 1959 I was selected to attend the thirtieth anniversary of the discovery of the first skull of Peking Man at the Zhoukoudian site near Beijing. I

was already a teacher in history then at Zhongshan University. I went to the meeting with my teacher, Professor Liang Chaotao. He was an anthropologist who promoted my chances to learn at the IVPP and he also introduced me to Jia.

What was your impression when first meeting Jia?

Jia was very famous. I was just a young man. Later that year, Jia went to northern Guangdong Province. He was coming to confirm several Paleolithic and Neolithic sites so we continued to meet before I went to Beijing. I thought "he looks very plain and sincere"; this made me feel very comfortable with him. I also met Professor Pei Wenzhong at this time. He was even more famous than Jia but also very plain and sincere. I was initially afraid of him but felt less afraid over time.

What were your early years at the IVPP like?

At this time our office was near what is now Beijing's *hutong* [traditional courtyard house] neighborhood. The directors had good relations with the staff. There was a small yard and I remember there was a date tree near Wu Rukang's office. We would steal the dates that ripened in mid-autumn and he would smile at us, so it was a friendly group. At this time, there were four divisions to the IVPP. Pei and Wu were co-directors of anthropology. Zhou Mingzhen headed mammalian paleontology and there was a Cenozoic laboratory headed by Yang Zhongjian and staffed by Jia and Zhou. Lastly, there was the Zhoukoudian field station that Jia headed.

Were there other students at the IVPP then?

No, not many. Before me were Wang Jian and Lü Zune. Wang was Jia's first student and Lü was a student of Pei. Another Zhongshan student came to learn paleontology before me, but by 1960 I was the only Paleolithic archaeology student.

What kind of teacher was Jia Lanpo?

Sometimes he took me outside Beijing for lectures. I read everything I could find but Jia said that was not enough. I needed to combine my reading with observations of specimens. He taught me to look at the materials as I read about them. Jia was my primary teacher but Pei, the department head, once said to me, "You are at IVPP and not only a student of Jia, you can also learn from me." Pei gave lectures to us on European Paleolithic archaeology. Jia's emphasis was on more practical knowledge and less formal lectures. During these times were the beginnings of the disagreements between Jia and Pei on the interpretations of the tools from Zhoukoudian. So, we all decided to re-study the materials in 1960. We hoped to publish a cooperative report about this but we had no idea that the "great storm" [the Cultural Revolution] was coming. Jia said to Pei, "You publish first." But Pei died in 1982 before he had the chance to publish this work, so it became the job of his student Zhang Senshui, and this was published in 1985. I went back to Zhongshan University in 1964 and returned to Beijing in 1974 with

two goals: The first was to work with Jia to do a book on *The Excavations at Zhoukoudian* in Chinese (1984) and *The Story of Peking Man* in English (1990). My second goal was never realized—that was to complete a comprehensive study of the artifacts from Zhoukoudian with Jia. I could not finish this work before Jia died in 2001.

What were your early field projects?

In 1961, I was sent to Yunnan Province where I investigated sites in the Lunan Basin near Kunming and the Stone Forest. This area was famous for fossil deposits. Colbert, the famous American paleontologist, had worked there in the 1940s. Zhou Mingzhen had visited there and found stone tools that he brought back to the IVPP. Pei described them and said that some tools were very similar to European Mousterian artifacts. So he sent Li Yanxian and me to confirm this discovery. I agreed with Pei. The Lunan materials and more discoveries from the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau display many similarities with European paleoliths, indeed!

I am a lucky person because I have found good Paleolithic projects almost every time. My first independent project where I was team head was in 1963, at Sanmenxia [Three Gates Gorge] in the middle reaches of the Yellow River, Henan Province. The work for young people at the IVPP was to go into the field and find Paleolithic materials. We had to work very hard and file reports every day. As we weren't finding much, we were told to work harder. I felt very worried and worked even harder. I got very sick from the heat and had to go to the hospital for exhaustion. I didn't want to stay there long, so I left after a few days and I said to my field crew, "We will go to the river near the hospital and slowly survey that area." That's where I found the site yielding a late Acheulean-like stone assemblage from the late Middle Pleistocene loess deposit. I remember at the end of the year when the annual meeting to survey our accomplishments took place, the IVPP director Professor Yang said, "When Pei and I first investigated that area in 1933, we were only able to do the geological profiles. There were no other discoveries. But now the young people have found lots of materials!" This taught me a useful lesson about fieldwork—it is important to work slowly, taking the time to know an area well if you want to find archaeological localities. You need to understand the geology and geography to understand the archaeology.

What other sites were important in the early years of your career?

In 1964 there was a large survey organized by the IVPP in the Lantian Basin near Xian City, Shaanxi Province. There were four teams organized to excavate, as well as at least ten more multidisciplinary teams to survey Cenozoic deposits. I was not a formal member of the IVPP then but I was included as a team leader. I thought there were Lower to Middle Pleistocene materials in this region because in 1963 they found Pleistocene fauna and the lower jaw of *Homo erectus* there. At this time, Pei viewed Zhoukoudian as the oldest Chinese locality, but Jia did not agree. Most of my colleagues followed Pei. My team was the most successful because we found a *Homo erectus* (Lantian Man) that predated Zhoukoudian. It's luck really—others continued work at the same place in the following years and made no new discoveries.

How did you make this discovery?

In 1964 I began fieldwork at the Gongwangling locality (Lantian Man site). The beginning of the excavation was very difficult. It was snowing and the sediments were sticky clay. Soft fossils were easily destroyed. I knew we needed a different excavation technique for this situation, so two weeks later I went to Professor Jia, the general director of field investigations, and asked for a new technician (those were the people who determined the digging techniques). This new person, Mr. Wu Ying, had good experience because he worked in Mongolia on the Chinese-Russian cooperative projects. He made new tools suitable for this excavation, and after he came we changed to a new method where blocks of sediment were removed. The blocks were then sent by train up to the laboratory at the IVPP.

Was this when you found the famous Lantian Man fossil?

From August to October 1964 they were working on the sediment blocks in the IVPP lab. However, I had to leave the IVPP in early October and was working with farmers in the countryside of South China under the political conditions of that time. Three days after I left, the Lantian *Homo erectus* skull emerged from the remains of an immense sediment block. One day a member of my work team had a newspaper with the big headline 'Lantian Man skull found by a field team headed by Huang Weiwen'. He said, "Is this you? Are you this Huang Weiwen?" I said, "No, not me." This was how I learned that my team had found Lantian Man. If we had not used Wu's new excavation methods, no Lantian Man!

My experiences at Lantian convinced me that my future would be Paleolithic archaeology. The Lantian work established my career and also established Chinese human paleontology. This was the first big research initiative in China after Zhoukoudian.

What was your most challenging project and why?

The comparative research on the small tools in China is very challenging and important. I raise this issue because small tools are a main component in most Lower Paleolithic stone industries of the Old World—not only in China but also in Africa and Europe at sites like Olduvai, Tanzania, Olorgesailie, Kenya, and Arago, France. So, it is necessary to include the small tools into our consideration for building the framework of evolution of early man and his culture. Unfortunately, not enough attention was given to them in the past. Now it is possible to do comparative work between Chinese, African, and European assemblages. For example, in Chicago I studied the specimens from Isimila [in the Field Museum] in 2001. I was so surprised at the similarities between these small artifacts and Zhoukoudian Locality 15. I see no difference. So, I am working on a paper that makes these comparisons.

Why is the question of hand axes in China so important to you?

The question of hand axes relates to the prevailing ideology for understanding the evolutionary framework of Paleolithic cultures in the Old World. Hallam Movius made the distribution of handaxes the main feature for dividing the West and

East. However, his "Two Culture Theory" [hand axe vs. chopper/chopping tool] is misleading and needs to be reevaluated. For example, the early work by Henri Breuil and Movius differed in their interpretation of the Dingcun stone tools. Breuil proposed connections with the late Acheulean based on the technology and typology, but Movius included Dingcun in his "chopper/chopping tool" complex. Movius' ideas influenced the thinking of Paleolithic archaeologists in China, Europe, and the U.S. for the next four decades. This is why Bose Basin sites occupy such an important place in the Paleolithic sequence in China. They clearly illustrate the presence of bifaces in Lower Paleolithic China.

So, do you think that your 1987 paper, *Bifaces in China,* was your most important publication?

No, not my most important. I didn't want to fight the idea of the "Movius Line" throughout my career, but I felt I had to get rid of these wrong ideas. I feel my publications on Lower Paleolithic typology and my recent work on the reconstruction of Pleistocene environments in East Asia are very important. Wrong ideas about typology and environment are used to support the Movius Line. Some people think that the East and West have very different environments and that all we see in the East are local adaptations to this, an idea that began with Teilhard de Chardin. When I visited the Museum of Prehistory of the Abri Pataud, where Movius excavated in 1958, one of my colleagues introduced me in jest to his wife as "the man who fights with Movius." However, I think if I had ever had the chance to speak directly with Movius we would have had a very collegial discussion!

What are your most recent projects?

I have active field projects in South China at the late Middle Pleistocene cave of Panxian Dadong and the earlier Bose Basin localities. I am also working on the geology and Paleolithic sequence in the Hong Kong area. Recently I published a paper that discusses the stratigraphy of the Paleolithic sequence of China. It synthesizes the works of geology, paleoenvironment, and archaeology of important sites in China since the 1920s. It took me two years to write this paper because it is a very complex combination of ideas.

How does work in other Asian countries influence the work of Chinese archaeologists?

It is not an ideal situation in Asian Paleolithic studies. Take, for example, Japan. It is very different from China. They are very Western in their approach to Paleolithic archaeology. You get a sense they are insular. The island setting is important, but they also view themselves as very different. This creates a distance with us, although we feel their fieldwork is excellent, careful work. This isolation from the rest of Asian archaeology was beginning to change but the recent scandal—the validity of a Lower Paleolthic occupation of the archipelago as highly questionable—has blocked this. But, I am optimistic that Japanese Paleo-

lithic archaeology will recover from these problems and in the near future Chinese and Japanese archaeology will be closer.

North Korea is still quite closed and little is known about Paleolithic archaeology there. I know there are some Middle Pleistocene cave sites but they are not well studied. A few Chinese have gone there to visit but we have little connection with the North Korean archaeologists. South Korea is a different situation. Many archaeologists there have been trained in France and the U.S. but they don't have strong backgrounds in Quaternary research and so their work is not as systematic as it could be. Recently we have organized collaborative projects, along with Russian archaeologists, to focus on pebble tools in Asia. There are some South Korean cave sites that are Middle Pleistocene but more are in the range of Middle to Upper Paleolithic. These are well dated. There are some earlier sites, like Chongok-ni, with hand axes that I think are an interesting comparison with those from the mid-lower Yangtze River. But most Korean archaeologists don't think these sites are as early as I think they are. Work in South Korea has great potential but needs more geological input.

What about Middle Pleistocene sites?

The Pacitanian is very interesting. I have studied these artifacts at the Harvard Peabody Museum. In my opinion the typology and technology look Middle Pleistocene, comparing to the Late Acheulean. But, there are problems with the stratigraphy, so it is safer to view them as Later Pleistocene. Thailand, Burma, and Vietnam also have complex geology in the Middle Pleistocene. These countries lack the infrastructure to pursue Paleolithic research themselves and what we know comes from collaboration with foreign archaeologists. So, the real need in these countries is good geological work. In China, since the 1980s, we have had a major development of geological studies such as research on the loess sequences, the Tibetan Plateau, the South China Sea cores, and so on. This is a unique situation for Chinese Paleolithic archaeology.

If you could have a project anywhere in the world, where would you pick?

I really would like to work everywhere! But realistically ... I am interested in comparisons between Africa and Europe. I would like to work in East Africa, I wish! ... at sites like Olduvai, Olorgesailie, and Isimila. But I view my next challenging work as focusing on the migrations of early humans from Africa, through South Asia and into East Asia in the Lower and Early Middle Pleistocene. Of course, later in time, it would be interesting to look at the ties between northern Asia and Europe.

What do you see as the future for Chinese and Asian Paleolithic archaeology?

I think it is very important to continue integrating the geology and paleoenvironmental work with archaeological interpretation. I hope that the young people at the IVPP will continue to do comparative studies between the Chinese assemblages and those from other regions. I hope that projects in China will continue to utilize multidisciplinary approaches and new technologies.

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